The disposal of corpses in an ethnicized civil war: Croatia, 1941–45¹

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Introduction

In May 1943, an Italian general who was being held prisoner of war was discussing the course of the war with his colleagues. He was describing an incident that had occurred in the territory occupied by Italy in Croatia and, unknown to him, he was overheard by his British supervisors. The incident concerned the recovery of the corpses of murdered Serbs thrown by the perpetrators – Croatian nationalists – into karst caves, which are typical land formations in that area. ‘The exhumations were a dreadful task’, the general said. ‘Nobody could enter the cave because the rotting bodies stank so badly. One man who we lowered down on a rope fainted and we had to pull him out again.’² It seems that the soldiers were finally equipped with gas masks.

During the Second World War, up to 45 million people lost their lives.³ Almost a quarter of them were victims of targeted attacks with the intent to kill and mass murders, rather than armed hostilities. While the death of the victims can be said to have been well researched, many historians consider their task completed once the persecuted individuals have perished. Yet the disposal of bodies in cases of genocide is more than just a field where further research is required; even more important is that the treatment of the dead reveals a great deal about the perpetrators, how they saw themselves, and the approach to and nature of their violence.

The episode described above, which is likely to have occurred in summer 1941 in western Croatia, provides an initial illustration of the complexity of the situation. The Ustaša often threw the bodies of their victims into karst caves, rivers or the sea, or left them on the ground, after having horribly mutilated them. This chapter discusses the massacres carried out by the Ustaša in Croatia during the Second World War. After a brief presentation of the historical background, the massacres carried out by the Ustaša militia and their corpse disposal methods are described. The following section covers the treatment of the dead in the Ustaša camps. The German and Italian reactions to discoveries of the physical traces of the massacres are then discussed. Before the concluding summary, the chapter raises the question of the extent to which the gruesome staging of death, using the corpses of killed opponents, might be part of the communications history of a civil war.

The Ustaša and the Croatian state

The independent state of Croatia was founded in April 1941, following the destruction of Yugoslavia by German troops. Hitler and Mussolini had agreed that an Italian vassal state should be established, to be ruled by the Fascist Croatian Ustaša movement. However, the German Reich and Italy differed on the precise organization of the Croatian state. It was split into two spheres of interest and provided occasion for numerous conflicts between the Axis powers, ranging from the handling of the Ustaša massacres to the question of whether the Jews in the Italian zone should be deported to Auschwitz. The aim of the Ustaša was to convert Croatia into an ethnically homogeneous nation-state, despite the fact that the Catholic Croatian portion of the population was only just over 50 per cent. The Germans supported the Ustaša in the transformation of Croatia into an ethnically homogenized state, and in doing so initially accepted the violent actions of Ustaša militias. What the Germans did not foresee was that, within a very short period, the violent acts of the Ustaša would set in motion a bloody civil war, marking the beginning of both effective opposition and massive counter-violence. The mistakes of German occupation policies and the ravages of the Ustaša transformed the Serbian resistance, and above all the Communist partisans, into successful movements. What had begun as unilateral mass violence on the part of the Ustaša, with their attempt to decimate or annihilate minorities in Croatia,

soon developed into a civil war in which three or more parties were fighting against one another, either supported or opposed by the occupation powers, and in which all parties committed war crimes. This observation relating to violence in the context of the civil war should not be seen as equating the atrocities in qualitative terms, for the Ustaša had access to state infrastructure, and could not only dispatch their militia to enemy territory, but could also set up camps and – with the assistance of the Germans – deport tens of thousands of Serbs and Jews. Nevertheless, it can be demonstrated that the rules applying to a dynamic civil war differ from those of traditional genocide. This affected both the murder techniques used and the question of the disposal of the corpses.

The massacres by the Ustaša and the disposal of the dead bodies

A series of massacres accompanied the assumption of power by the Ustaša, in April and May 1941.⁴ In June 1941, the use of violence by the Ustaša took on endemic proportions in some regions. In the regions populated by Serbs, especially, there were no Croatian state structures at all, and for this reason it was possible for warlord regimes to become established that were particularly prone to violence; here, the use of violence on the civil population by the militia was part of a battle for regional dominance over local resistance groups, but also against state control from above. In June 1941, the militia began attacking Serbian villages, first in Herzegovina and then in other regions. If villagers were unable to flee beforehand, the band of soldiers marched in and launched massacres, mostly of the male population and sometimes also the female population. The methods of killing varied from one place to another.

What about the way in which they treated the bodies of the dead? Can we assume that a movement engaged in mass murder stops to think about what it is going to do with the corpses of the people it has killed? In general terms, the answer to this question is no. In many cases, the perpetrators made no preparations for the corpses. If they wanted to spare themselves work with the corpses, they simply left the bodies at the location of the massacre and relied on the families or the gendarmerie (the local – though nationally networked – police force) to bury them.⁵ Since this did not always occur, fields of stinking corpses were created that polluted the surrounding areas and attracted wild animals.⁶ Often the bodies

were simply disposed of in nearby rivers.⁷ However, in some cases, the perpetrators hastily buried the dead in mass graves that had been dug in advance, sometimes by the victims themselves; or they blew up the edges of the gullies where the murders had occurred. Villagers often carried out these tasks, too, in forced labour. However, they did not do their work carefully. There were cases of people who were buried while they were still alive, and corpses that were buried either inadequately or incompletely, so that survivors soon began searching for their relatives in the mass graves.⁸

Initially, the Ustaša's victims were unsuspecting and unprepared for the attacks. But from early summer 1941, opposition grew, and with it counter-violence on the part of Serbian and Muslim militia. In general, this meant that the use of violence in the civil war became more multilateral, and the feeling of menace from all sides became more pervasive. Mass murders blurred into paramilitary conflicts in which territories did not usually remain long in the hands of any one warring party. For this reason, the perpetrators often acted in great haste, and in fear of resistance and retaliation they resorted to hit-and-run tactics in which entire villages were set on fire. On occasion they fled the scene of their crimes. Sometimes prisoners were locked in buildings which were then set on fire – but did not always completely burn down. This was the case, for instance, in the Serbian village of Kotorani, which was attacked on 22 August 1941 by a Muslim militia.⁹ On 7 September 1941, a Ustaša mob killed 20 Serbian villagers in the hamlet of Reljevo, near Sarajevo. The prisoners were bound with wire and taken to a house which was then set on fire. Croatian armed forces later found the charred corpses and took photographs.¹⁰

However, the Ustaša practice of throwing the corpses into rivers and caves played a particular role. At the beginning of June 1941, 92 dead Serbs were pulled out of the Vrbas, Vrbanja and Save rivers.¹¹ In mid-June 1941, a Croatian gendarmerie patrol found 14 male corpses that had floated to the estuary of a river. On the first occasions when corpses were washed up or discovered in fields or on the edge of paths, they attracted a great deal of attention. Reporters provided detailed descriptions of the locations, coroners examined the corpses, gendarmes interrogated residents and sought the perpetrators, who were initially unknown.¹² Gendarmerie officers were often the first to find the traces of the massacres and order the disposal of the corpses. In the early stages, in particular, the reports of the gendarmes clearly show that they were very unsure as to how they should interpret the acts of violence by the Ustaša bands. It

was still unimaginable that the new Croatian government and its militia had set a mass murder in motion.

The conduct of the militia indicated a certain ambivalence. It appeared to be the simplest solution to throw the corpses into rivers and allow them to float away. In some cases, the imagined destination of the corpses was the sea, a topos that has entered into the contemporary radical right-wing song heritage.¹³ At the same time, they put up with the horror disseminated by the floating corpses. In other cases, by contrast, the publicity created by the corpses floating in the rivers was the declared aim of the perpetrators. This is illustrated by an example in which the bodies of a family of four were found tied to one another washed up on land at the end of May 1941 in Bosanska Gradiška. According to a report by the German embassy, a board was fixed to the corpses with the words 'Enjoy your trip to Belgrade'.¹⁴ Thus the corpses served as a means to announce that the Ustaša had assumed power and the Serbs must leave Croatia, dead or alive. The corpses that were washed up were a particular source of horror when they showed signs of abuse or mutilation. Yet the Ustaša bands did not have control over when or where the corpses would be washed up. As a result, the murderers created unanticipated problems for themselves. For instance, in Belgrade, the municipal river baths had to be closed due to the fear of an epidemic, since the Save was deemed to be contaminated. The German authorities in Serbia were anyway very ill-disposed towards the activities of the Ustaša in neighbouring Croatia, and were keen for the situation in Serbia to calm down. Corpses were even occasionally washed up in distant Romania.¹⁵ In der Neretva, clusters of bound corpses obstructed shipping and impaired relations with the Italians, into whose territory the corpses eventually floated.¹⁶ In view of these consequences it is hardly surprising that the practice of throwing corpses into rivers or leaving them at the place of the massacre was a source of abhorrence and provoked massive protests.

An additional special form of violence on the part of the Ustaša became established in the western Croatian karst areas. Here, perpetrators developed the practice of disposing of their victims' bodies by throwing them into the crevices of the widespread karst caves. The great advantages of doing this were that the mass murders could be denied and the troublesome disposal of the corpses was no longer necessary. The numerous karst fissures in western Croatia, which are so typical in the Dinaric Alps, proved suitable for this purpose. Jules Verne described the Dalmatian cave as a 'broad and

deep crevice whose steep walls ... fall straight down into the depths. No steps are evident with the help of which one might climb up or down. In other words, we have an abyss before us, the sight of which attracts and captivates us, and which will certainly return to us nothing of that which we throw into it.¹⁷ The Ustaša militia frequently shot their victims or battered them to death on the edge of such fissures and then pushed them into the depths. Sometimes they threw in hand grenades after the bodies or blew up the entrances to the caves. The first record of this relates to massacres carried out on 3 and 7 June 1941 in the districts of Trebinje and Ljubinje, which were mainly populated by Serbs.¹⁸ Groups of Ustaša militia sent from Zagreb had carried out mass arrests among the local Serbian population. They held the prisoners for a few days, then released a small number of them and apparently decided to kill the remainder. In both instances, they determined to do this during the night. They bound the prisoners, in each case more than 100 people, covered their eyes and took them – by foot or truck – close to the entrance to the caves they deemed suitable for the mass murder. There they bound the men together in small groups, using wire, led them to the edge of the cliff, hit them and fired at them and pushed the severely injured and dead into the depths.¹⁹ While the first massacre went smoothly, from the point of view of the perpetrators, a panic arose among either the perpetrators (a kind of ‘forward panic’) or the victims on the occasion of the second act of violence (7 June) and this resulted in the escape of up to 50 prisoners.²⁰ Within a very short period of time, the entire area was informed about the massacre. It soon got around that some of the victims had survived the plunge into the depths. Since, meanwhile, the perpetrators had withdrawn from the scene of the crime near the village of Korita, a group of armed Serbian farmers secured the entry to the cave and, with considerable difficulty, rescued the injured survivors, who received medical aid and were then taken to safe villages or across the border to neighbouring Montenegro. Immediately after the massacres, the Serbian population revolted against the Ustaša.

These two massacres were the first in a long series of slaughters in which Ustaša militia killed Serbian prisoners in karst caves, with their local knowledge proving helpful to them in the process. In at least one instance, the violence was somewhat institutionalized, since a driveway was said to have been constructed to a cave for the specific purpose of facilitating the transportation of the people destined to be killed.²¹ Eventually, the other warring parties also

got used to throwing corpses in caves. In the second half of the war, Communist partisans are said to have pushed numerous Fascist collaborators into the karst crevices, and the Četnici also made use of this method.²² On the Italian side, the practice was described in the *foibe*, a narrative with a mystical character telling of victims who, apparently, were mainly Italians.

However, the fact that the corpses vanished into the earth did not mean that the bodies disappeared altogether. Sometimes subterranean rivers flushed them back to the surface,²³ or else the mass graves were discovered – as is still happening nowadays in Slovenia and Croatia.²⁴ Above all, however, powerful and bloodcurdling myths emerged about the murders in the karsts. For example, it was said that so-called crevice women (*jamarice*) had survived the plunge into the gullies, were living from the food that shepherds occasionally threw down there and had even given birth to children.²⁵

Why did the perpetrators resort to throwing corpses into fissures? In Italian historiography, it has been suggested that this was a typical southern Slav violent practice with a ritual character.²⁶ However, the reasons for this specific approach to killing and corpse disposal in the karst territories are probably related to the form of the landscape rather than the culture of the region and its inhabitants. The murdered victims were pushed into the caves simply because they were there. Nonetheless, one possible specific reason is worth mentioning. With regard to the Communist partisans who threw their opponents into the caves, the historian Rolf Wörsdörfer conjectures that it was also ‘the fear of the grief of the enemy, of the extended Serbian Orthodox burial ritual and the suggestive power of the mourning women which persuaded the partisan groups to dispose of the bodies of opponents they had shot’.²⁷ This may also have played a role for the Ustaša. Furthermore, apart from the practical advantages for the perpetrators, the disappearance of the bodies also represented a threat to the living, which was possibly more effective since it was more covert than the murders, which could be reconstructed and imagined on the basis of rediscovered corpses.

Mass murders in camps

This brings us to the question of how the Ustaša dealt with the corpses of people whom they murdered in their permanent establishments, particularly in camps. While Serbs were the primary

victim group of the massacres, as discussed above, mass killings in the camps affected Serbs, Gypsies and Jews equally. It seems, however, that the killers made no distinction between the groups when it came to the treatment of the corpses. Hence when talking about victims of massacres in camps, we are discussing Serbs, Gypsies and Jews.

We need to distinguish between temporary camps and those which were larger and existed for years, in particular the Jasenovac camp. In the former, corpse disposal practices often resembled those of the mobile militia who had carried out massacres of Serbian villagers. Close to the western Croatian town of Gospić there was a group of camps in the summer of 1941 in which the Ustaša interned and murdered Serbian and Jewish prisoners. One of these camps was located on the Mediterranean island of Pag and another close to a hamlet called Jadovno in the coastal mountains. In neither camp had any buildings, such as crematoria, been constructed. Here, the question is whether we can demonstrate that the Ustaša planned the mass murder in advance, or whether it was not, rather, mounting brutality which led to the security guards massacring a large number of the prisoners. Another question in this respect is whether, if the slaughter had been planned in advance, a relatively small, rocky island in the Adriatic could be regarded as suitable for mass murder.

A few weeks after the initial establishment of internment camps in Jadovno and on Pag, the Ustaša security guards there began mass executions of prisoners. The security guards killed hundreds of the prisoners taken to Pag, often immediately after their arrival.²⁸ They threw many of the corpses into the sea,²⁹ a technique of mass murder, or corpse disposal, that had been used by other mass murder regimes such as the Ottoman Empire and the Argentine juntas, although the Ustaša did not transport victims out to sea but simply threw them directly off the cliffs into the water. When Italian troops marched into western Croatia in August 1941, the perpetrators panicked, disbanded the camp and killed all the prisoners they could not evacuate from the island. They were, though, unable to dispose of all the corpses in time. When they marched in, the Italian troops were faced with a horrific sight. They found about 800 corpses, which they incinerated.³⁰ In Jadovno, too, the Italians began recovering the corpses that had been thrown into the karst fissures, although this task proved to be much more difficult. In the area of the camp there are numerous karst caves, some of them up to fifty metres deep.³¹ In the years after

the war, a number of mass graves were investigated, but some of the crime scenes were never found.

In the more permanent camps, the Ustaša had to adopt a more methodological approach to the disposal of corpses. This applied above all to Jasenovac. Here, too, there were cases where the corpses were thrown into the Save river, but this would not have been sufficient to dispose of all the corpses of those murdered in the camp. The marshy land around the camp, the repeated flooding in the camp and the long frost during the winter made it difficult to construct mass graves, although this was necessary due to the high mortality of the prisoners and the ongoing mass killings. In the winter of 1941–42, the situation in Jasenovac was hellish. Emaciated corpses were piled up in heaps in the open air. Humidity, cramped conditions and thoughtless disposal of the dead led to the outbreak of a typhus epidemic, which further reduced the chances of survival for the prisoners. It was in this situation, in mid-November 1941, that the mass killings of prisoners occurred.³² However, this created more problems for the camp administration because they could no longer cope with the disposal of the prisoners who had died or been murdered.³³ Since the corpses could not be buried in the frozen earth, they were instead sunk in the Save river.³⁴

The question arises as to whether the failure of the perpetrators to dispose of the corpses of their victims also resulted in delays in the murder procedures themselves, as was sometimes the case when the crematoria in the Nazi extermination camps broke down.³⁵ For instance, Croatian authors have claimed that the mass murders of the Gypsies were postponed from winter to summer 1942 because the ground was frozen and it was not possible to bury the corpses.³⁶ Apart from the fact that there is no documentary proof for such speculations, they make the assumption that the perpetrators had a coherent extermination programme which they worked through systematically, putting it aside when they encountered difficulties, and resuming it later. No empirical evidence can be provided for this assumption either.

As a reaction to the catastrophe that it had caused, the camp administration attempted to transfer the death zone to the Bosnian side of the Save river, the location of a number of 'killing fields' where mass murders had been carried out since 1942, and where the victims were buried in a very makeshift way in damp ground. Prisoner units were specially created to dispose of the corpses.³⁷ Later on, a crematorium was built in Jasenovac for the cremation of corpses. However, according to witness reports this was very prone

to breakdown and seldom in operation. The disposal of corpses therefore remained a problem until the camp was disbanded.³⁸ After the war, members of a Yugoslav commission of investigation exhumed numerous bodies in the area of Jasenovac and from the courses of the local rivers.³⁹

German and Italian reactions

Because the Ustaša repeatedly left behind unburied corpses of people they had murdered, either intentionally or through carelessness, there were recurring conflicts with the powers whose attention was drawn to the corpses. This applied first and foremost to the Italian occupying forces, but also, to a certain extent, to the Germans. In this connection, scenes occurred such as that described at the beginning of this chapter. The background to this was the complex relationship of the Ustaša with their allies – extremely tense relations in the case of the Italians and an allegiance coloured by mistrust in the case of the Germans – and a fight to the death with their Communist and Nationalist Serbian enemies.

The territory controlled by the Ustaša was very fluid, and as a result they were unable to prevent groups competing with them from gaining access to the locations of the massacres. In August 1941, Croatia and Italy fell out with one another politically, and the Croatian militia were deprived of their power in the Italian sphere of interest in western Croatia, in other words, precisely the area where the Ustaša had previously carried out numerous mass murders. From then on, the Italian army placed greater emphasis on an alliance with the Nationalist Serbian elites. One foundation of this alliance was an arrangement that the people murdered by the Ustaša be respectfully buried. The Italian army therefore organized the recovery of corpses at dozens of locations where massacres had taken place and conducted targeted searches of the karst territories.⁴⁰ They went even further, questioning the residents of the surrounding communities and documenting the mass murders.⁴¹ In the vicinity of the Herzegovinian town of Trebinje, for instance, thirteen corpses were recovered on 6 October 1941 – an operation which took an entire day. The bodies were taken by truck to the Serb-Orthodox cemetery of the town and ceremonially buried, to the sound of loud and continuous ringing of the bells. The population took part in large numbers. The burial of 140 corpses in November in Nevisinje followed a similar procedure.

The Croatian gendarmes, who, unlike the Ustaša, had not been driven out of the Italian occupied territory, reported on the events. They disliked the partisan conduct of the Italians – Italian officers, for instance, laid wreaths on the graves – as well as the fact that Croats were forbidden to attend the ceremony and were thereby being collectively branded as perpetrators. Nevertheless, there were also cases in which the Croatian gendarmerie was ordered to attend exhumations, and this, just as much, was tantamount to a public humiliation.⁴² The fear was that the Italian side was attempting to incite people in a targeted way against the Croatian state and was forging an anti-Croatian alliance over the graves of the dead.⁴³ The Croatian gendarmes were not completely off the mark with their criticism, since the burial ceremonies were cleverly staged as celebrations of Serbian–Italian brotherhood, which both sides were able to exploit politically for their own ends. Thus the Italian military police, the *carabinieri*, used the issue for building the trust of the Serbian population, for instance by visiting Serbian households to inform them when relatives had been killed.⁴⁴ Even shortly after the mass murders, some of the entrances to the caves had become places of commemoration, where the dead were remembered and people swore to take up the fight against the Ustaša regime.

The Germans had more difficulties dealing with the locations of the mass murders carried out by their Ustaša partners. Due to strategic alliance considerations, the Germans' reaction was reserved despite their outrage at the massacres. In general terms, they attempted to guide Ustaša policies of persecuting Serbs into 'sensible' channels, prevent mass murders outside the camps and, above all, to rein in public violence.⁴⁵ 'More blatant cases' were to be subjected to investigation by the Wehrmacht but the troops were not to intervene.⁴⁶ Consequently, German criticism was particularly noisy in cases where the Ustaša made use of gruesome killing methods. However, since the protests were supposed to be submitted through diplomatic channels, cases in which Wehrmacht commanders intervened directly on their own initiative against mass murders remained the exception. If this did occur, however, the German procedure differed little from that employed in the case of the Italians. As early as spring 1941, a Wehrmacht lieutenant ordered that some forty perpetrators be arrested following one of the first Ustaša massacres in Gudovac, and had the corpses, which had been hastily buried in a pit, exhumed and buried. However, the prisoners were released again as a result of political pressure.⁴⁷ When the Ustaša carried out a particularly horrific massacre

during the night of 23 October 1942 in the village of Palančište near Prijedor, in which some 300 men, women and children were killed with axes and knives, and where the perpetrators also defiled the bodies of the dead, the Wehrmacht ordered that the perpetrators be sought and arrested.⁴⁸ The German field gendarmerie and the Croatian gendarmerie carried out the exhumation together.⁴⁹ In the case of a massacre in Kukunjevac in October 1942, German soldiers searched for a mass grave with the aid of search dogs. Once they found the grave, which had been partially left open, they sealed it properly.⁵⁰ Whether the Wehrmacht officers on the spot intervened against violent actions or not was a matter for their own initiative and determination. None of their supervisors stood in their way. No sanctions were to be expected. On the contrary, a certain pride tends to shine through in army reports in instances where German soldiers showed Ustaša their limits. Nevertheless, this was not in line with German policy, which is why the interventions were no more than individual cases. And as the civil war went on, and the adversaries dug their claws ever more deeply into one another, it became increasingly difficult to guide the violence in any way.

Demonstrative violence – a means of communication

To a greater extent than in a conventional war, and more, too, than in cases of asymmetrical use of violence, where the perpetrators have a monopoly over violence, the participants in a civil war communicate by trying to shock a sense of fear into their opponents and to spread horror among the enemy civil population.⁵¹ It was obvious that the opposing side would respond to the way in which the corpses had been left behind. Mountains of corpses or individual human bodies thus contained explicit or implicit messages to opponents. Nevertheless, it would be wrong to see messages in all aspects of violent activities, and it is important to comprehend the ambivalence of this morbid legacy since, in the first instance, the horrific violent acts were, above all, an expression of the whipped up hatred and passions in an emotional civil war that people regarded as existential. In many areas, it was hardly possible to put a stop to the Ustaša attacks on the Serbian civil population. In addition, there was, however, an instrumental level to many violent acts that needs to be deciphered.

Thus it was that the Ustaša, in their ideological hatred, were unable to desist from attacks on the Serbian population. At the

same time, this conformed to their strategy of preventing any stabilization of the situation wherever possible, since they had set themselves up well in their system of warlord dominions. Pacification of their battle territory would have put an end to their highway robbery and they might also have been called to account for their deeds. For this reason, too, they torpedoed all attempts to pacify Croatia. Here are two examples that illustrate this strategy. In order to halt the insurgency, the authorities, supported by the Wehrmacht, repeatedly called upon the civil population to return to their villages and promised them exemption from punishment as well as personal safety and the safety of their property in return. In this situation, all the militia had to do was to attack individual returning villagers – and then this laboriously established trust would be destroyed in one fell swoop.⁵² In one instance in Bosanska Krupa, ‘14 Serbian insurgents who had laid down their weapons were literally slaughtered with knives by Ustaše’.⁵³ When negotiators for the Četnici and the Croatian authorities attempted, in spring 1942, to negotiate a cease-fire, a Ustaša militia again intervened, surrounding the location where the negotiations were being conducted with some 100 armed men, killing a Serb and then having his severed head carried on a pole through the town. As might be expected, this resulted in an immediate breakdown in the negotiations.⁵⁴ Thus, murders were particularly brutal in cases where the militia wished to indicate to the Serbian population that peaceful co-existence was impossible. This message could be directed at people returning home, negotiators or Serbian converts to Catholicism. However, the most gruesome was the violence against people who, from the point of view of the Ustaša, represented everything they were fighting against. The perpetrators invested much time, energy and strength in many of the crimes against Orthodox priests or certain representatives of the Serbian resistance, and they did so in a manner that is reminiscent of ritual murder. Before killing their victims, they often abused them in the most gruesome manner. This included setting fire to beards, gouging out eyes, cutting off body members, noses, ears and tongues and slashing open their bodies.⁵⁵ Tools such as knives, wooden wedges, hammers and axes were used. The emotional closeness of the perpetrators to their victims is evident in view of the lack of distance in their methods of killing. In such cases, exhibiting body members documented, as it were, the completion of the deed.

Finally, the militia carried out numerous acts of sexual violence. Mass rape is typically an aspect of the violence in a civil war. The

male dominance of the militia, the unlimited and general brutality and the blurring of borders between combatants and the civil population allow soldiers to commit acts in times of war they could not engage in during peacetime.⁵⁶ Here it is of interest to note that the murderers deliberately left the corpses of the women they had raped either naked or placed in specific positions, to transmit to their (male) war opponents the message that they were unable to protect their women. This also related explicitly to pregnant women, as the Wehrmacht reported in June 1942 after they had found several mutilated corpses of murdered Serb women.⁵⁷

Summary

We obtained the picture of a complex situation in which several parties in Croatia fought one another over a period of years. The trigger for both the intercommunal violence and the civil war was the mass murders by the Ustaša, who carried out these massacres in their attempt to assume dominance over a multi-ethnic territory, push through their ethnocratic regime and decimate the Serbian population. However, this mass violence was characterized by regional variations, different kinds of action on the part of the differing perpetrator groups and varying forms of violence. Overall, there was little planning or system in the acts of violence, even if the Ustaša probably achieved their terrorist goals, since they provoked panic in the Serbian settlement area, leading to expulsions and a mass flight of Serbs out of Croatia.

The unsystematic procedures of the Ustaša militia were also reflected in their treatment of the dead. Massacres in rural areas followed very variable patterns. Sometimes corpses were disposed of but at other times not. Thus, by comparison with the mass murders carried out by the German Security Police and Security Service task forces in the occupied Soviet Union, the procedures were not very systematic. That applies to the treatment of the human remains of the murdered as well. In their eastern territories, the Germans desperately tried to cover up all traces of the genocide they had committed. Once the Soviet troops started advancing and liberating territories where mass executions had taken place, a task force ('Action 1005') was put in charge to destroy the evidence, to exhume mass graves and to incinerate the corpses. The Special Command 4a unit under SS-Standartenführer Blobel developed a whole range of techniques for the disposal of corpses.

In Croatia, nothing like that happened. The Germans framed the atrocities in Croatia in terms of an unavoidable civil war that had resulted from ancient hatreds, and less in terms of a unilateral genocide with a clear group of perpetrators on the one hand and victims on the other. The Germans did not feel responsible for the Ustaša genocide and felt they had had nothing to hide. Moreover, the Ustaša mass murder of Serbs, Jews and Gypsies was public knowledge.⁵⁸ They did, however, destroy traces of the mass murder of Jews they had committed in Serbia.⁵⁹ Interestingly, Paul Blobel was transferred to Croatia in October 1944. But there he was not responsible for ‘unearthing’ any longer. Instead, he headed an anti-partisan unit.

In terms of the lack of systematic fashion of mass murder, much the same applies to the Ustaša camps. The name often given to Jasenovac, ‘Ausschwitz of the Balkan Peninsular’, hides more than it reveals,⁶⁰ since – more frequently still than in the German extermination camps – mass murder in the Ustaša camps was characterized by a momentum that was hard to rein in, by loss of control and mass deaths that were often, but not always, intended. Thus it is hardly astonishing that, when it came to the disposal of corpses, the security guards ultimately lost control and that attempts to dispose of corpses in the camp were erratic.

When the armed uprisings against the Ustaša regime began in the summer of 1941, the nature of the violence altered. Although the greatest violence, in quantitative terms, and the most systematic and brutal, in qualitative terms, continued to originate from the Ustaša, from then on the Ustaša were no longer the only group carrying out violent acts, since the country slid into a civil war in which all sides were responsible for violence. The civil war parties were now fighting an existential battle against one another in which, in their view, the only outcome could be victory or defeat. This explains the emotional content of the violence and some of the symbolic subtext. More than previously, the hostile groups were communicating with each other through their acts of murder. In this respect, the Ustaša attained mastery since they had a vested interest in stoking up the ethnicized civil war, which was helping to legitimize the existence of the militia. They wanted to make sure that a multi-ethnic Yugoslav society could never come into existence again. By defiling corpses and exhibiting the bodies, they wished to show their opponents that peaceful coexistence would never again return.

Notes

- 1 The text of this chapter was translated from the author's German by Cadenza Academic Translations.
- 2 Taken from a transcript of the overheard remarks of an Italian general held as a prisoner of war. BRIG 33, 26 May 1943, UK National Archives, w.o. 38/2154, pp. 1–3.
- 3 J. Echternkamp, *Die 101 wichtigsten Fragen: Der Zweite Weltkrieg* (Munich: Beck, 2010), p. 139.
- 4 See A. Korb, *Im Schatten des Weltkriegs: Massengewalt der Ustaša gegen Serben, Juden und Roma in Kroatien 1941–1945* (Hamburg: Hamburg Edition, 2013).
- 5 This occurred after a massacre in Sekulinci, Slavonia, in the Papuk mountains in February 1942. See German Embassy Zagreb (DGA), Report (appendix 2c), 26 October 1942, German Federal Military Archives (henceforth BA-MA), RH 31 III/7. Also, after many massacres, the bodies were scattered over a wide area, especially when the Ustaša had been pursuing fugitives. See V. Dedijer, *The War Diaries of Vladimir Dedijer* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1990), p. 270.
- 6 Report by the 3rd Ustaša platoon of the 1st Infantry Battalion, July 1941, printed in *Borbe u Bosni i Hercegovini 1941 god.: Knjiga 1*, Zbornik dokumenata i podataka o narodnooslobodilačkom ratu jugoslovenskih naroda, vol. 4 (Belgrade: Vojnoistorijski Institut Jugoslovenske Armije, 1951). See also Arthur Häffner to DGiA, 23 June 1941, BA-MA, RH 31 III/13, p. 10.
- 7 Interview with Miloš Despot from Bijeljina, US Holocaust Memorial Museum (henceforth USHMM) Archives RG-50.468/10, Tape 1. See also P. Broucek (ed.), *Deutscher Bevollmächtigter General in Kroatien und Zeuge des Untergangs des 'Tausendjährigen Reiches'. Ein General im Zwielicht. Edmund Glaise von Horstenau* (Vienna: Böhlau, 1988), p. 168.
- 8 The 1st Gendarmerie Division related in a report dated 16 August 1941 to the RAVSIGUR how the surviving Serbian population coped with the consequences of the mass murder. Serbian Military Archives (henceforth AVII), NDH/145, 2/1.
- 9 3rd HOP to RAVSIGUR, 28 August 1941, AVII, NDH/145, 6/43. The name of the village was Kotor or Kotorani.
- 10 Interrogation by Muja Sadžak, gendarmerie commander in Sarajevo, 30 September 1941, AVII, NDH/150a, 2/28.
- 11 DGA, Report (appendix 2), 26 October 1942, BA-MA, RH 31 III/7, without running number. Already at the end of May 1941, the corpse of the Orthodox bishop of Banja Luka, Platon, was found at the confluence of the two rivers.
- 12 Gendarmerie post Ilidža to 4th HOP, Report no. 207, 25 May 1941, AVII, NDH 143B, 41/1-3, printed in S. Vukčević, (ed.), *Zločini Nezavisne Države Hrvatske, 1941–1945, Zločini na jugoslovenskim prostorima u prvom i drugom svetskom ratu: Zbornik dokumenata 1* (Belgrade: Vojnoistorijski institut, 1993), p. 57, doc. 34, as well as gendarmerie Zenica to 4th HOP, 18 June 1941, AVII, NDH/143, 1/18-1.

- 13 Rock band Thompson makes reference to this topos, possibly referring to contemporary songs.
- 14 See Serbian Eastern Orthodox Diocese of the United States of America and Canada (ed.), *Martyrdom of the Serbs: Persecutions of the Serbian Orthodox Church and Massacre of the Serbian People* (Chicago: Palan-dech's Press, 1943).
- 15 American Joint Distribution Committee Belgrade report on washed up corpses, 13 March 1946, in Yad Vashem Archives (YVA), O.10/11, Bl. 4 and YVA, O.10/3-1-5. In the 1990s, the story and even possibly the practice was reinstated. See J. B. Allcock, *Explaining Yugoslavia* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000), p. 382.
- 16 See S. Kvesić, *Dalmacija u narodnooslobodilačkoj borbi* (Split: Vojna Štamparia, 1979), p. 79; J. Steinberg, *All or Nothing: The Axis and the Holocaust 1941–1943* (London: Routledge, 1990), p. 49.
- 17 Quoted in J. Strutz (ed.), *Dalmatien* (Klagenfurt: Europa erlesen – Wieser Verlag, 1998), p. 61. See also R. Wörsdörfer, *Krisenherd Adria 1915–1955: Konstruktion und Artikulation des Nationalen im italienisch-jugoslawischen Grenzraum* (Paderborn: Ferdinand Schöningh Verlag, 2004), p. 477, who discusses the link between violence and landscape forms in relation to the karst.
- 18 The description of the massacre of Korita is based on T. Dulić, *Utopias of Nation: Local Mass Killing in Bosnia and Herzegovina, 1941–42*, Acta Universitatis Upsaliensis vol. 218 (Uppsala: Uppsala University Press, 2005), p. 124. See also J. Tomasevich, *War and Revolution in Yugoslavia, 1941–1945: Occupation and Collaboration* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001), p. 938; B. Kovačević & S. Skoko, 'Junski ustanak u Hercegovini 1941. godine' ('The June 1941 uprising in Hercegovina'), in *Istorija radničkog pokreta: Zbornik radova I* (Belgrade: Institut za izučavanje radničkog pokreta, 1965), p. 107.
- 19 The statements are to be found in the Archives of Serbia and in the Archives of Yugoslavia and some of them have been published. See M. Bjelica, 'Zapisi sa koritske jame', in S. Kovačević (ed.), *Hercegovina u NOB* (Belgrade: Vojnoizdavački i Novinski Centar, 1986); V. Dedijer & A. Miletić (eds), *Proterivanje Srba sa ognjišta 1941–1944: Svedočanstva* (Belgrade: Prosveta, 1989), p. 155.
- 20 Dulić, *Utopias of Nation*, pp. 136ff. For the massacre at Ljubinje see S. Radić, *Lubinje i Popovo polje, 1941–1945* (Lubinje: Kultura, 1969), p. 2217.
- 21 For reports of this kind about a cave near the village of Boričevac on the Bosnian–Croatian border, not far from Kulen Vakuf, see R. Pilipović, 'Bosanska krajina u Drugom svetskom ratu: U ogledalu sudbine Srpske pravoslavne crkve', at <http://pravoslavje.spc.rs/broj/978/tekst/bosanska-krajina-u-drugom-svetskom-ratu/print/lat> (accessed 3 December 2013).
- 22 On partisans see K.-P. Schwarz, 'Auch Norma lebte noch', *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 27 March 2010, p. 3; for the Četnici see J. Jurjević, *Pogrom u Krnjeuši 9. i 10. kolovoza 1941* (Zagreb: Vikarijat Banjalučke biskupije, 1999).

- 23 M. Djilas, *Der Krieg der Partisanen: Jugoslawien 1941–1945* (Vienna: Molden Verlag, 1978), p. 126. [In English: *Wartime* (New York: Harcourt, 1980)]
- 24 See for example *Der Spiegel* online, 'Einestages, Rätsel der verschwundenen Division', http://einestages.spiegel.de/static/topicalalbum/background/3931/1/raetsel_der_verschwundenen_division.html (accessed 31 May 2012).
- 25 N. Sremac, *Zapisi sa drugog zasjedanja ANVOJ-a* (Zagreb: Znanje, 1964), p. 43.
- 26 See Wörsdörfer, *Krisenherd Adria*, pp. 483, 502.
- 27 Ibid., pp. 483, 502.
- 28 N. Lengel-Krizman & M. Sobolevski, 'Hapšenje 165 omladinaca u Zagrebu u svibnju 1941. g', *Novi Omanut*, 31 (1998), pp. 7–9; M. Peršen, *Ustaški logori* (Zagreb: Globus, 1990), p. 84; for the report of a survivor see the statement by Bozo Švarc, no. 571/45, 17 July 1945, Croatian State Archives (henceforth HAD), ZKRZ-GUZ 2235/6-45, k. 11. See also B. Švarc, 'Kako sam preživio', *Ha-kol*, 69–70 (2001), pp. 5ff.
- 29 10th military post to Command 2nd Italian army, 1 August 1941, YVA, O.10/64, Bl. 3.
- 30 See M. Shelah, *Heshbon Damim: Hatzalat Yehude Croatia al yedey ha-italkim, 1941–1943* (Tel Aviv: Moresheet, 1986), p. 35; I. Goldstein & S. Goldstein, *Holokaust u Zagrebu* (Zagreb: Novi Liber, 2001), p. 292. Non-verifiable extracts from a report by an Italian army commission are printed in A. Zemljarić, *Haron i Sudbine: Ustaški koncentracijski logori Slana i Metajna na ostrvu Pagu – 1941* (Belgrade: Četvrti jul, 1988), p. 222, at www.jadovno.com/originalni-dokumenti-talijanske-vojno-sanitetske-sluzbe.html (accessed 31 May 2012). See also Peršen, *Ustaški logori*, p. 101. For Croatian reports on the Italian procedure see Zap. 1. puk. an Ravsigur, 21 September 1941, AVII, NDH/152, 5/43.
- 31 According to Zatezalo, the perpetrators made the scene of the crime unrecognizable by pouring concrete into the karst caves. See Đ. Zatezalo, *Jadovno: Kompleks ustaških logora 1941* (Belgrade: Muzej žrtava genocida, 2007), vol. 1, p. 738. However, it is doubtful whether they went to so much trouble in view of the imminent Italian occupation.
- 32 See recollections of Albert Maestro, printed in D. Sindik (ed.), *Sećanja Jevreja na logor Jasenovac* (Belgrade: Savez jevrejskih opština Jugoslavije, 1972), p. 122.
- 33 See N. Mataušić (ed.) (with N. Jovičić), *Jasenovac Concentration Camp: Exhibition About the Beginning of the Camp System, August 1941–February 1942* (Zagreb: Biblioteka Kameni Cvijet, 2003), p. 35. See also recollections of Jakov Kabiljo and Albert Maestro, printed in Sindik, *Sećanja Jevreja*, pp. 87, 123; the latter reports that the unit to which he belonged buried 1,200 corpses. See also Peršen, *Ustaški logori*, p. 139.
- 34 See recollections of Jakov Kabiljo, in Sindik, *Sećanja Jevreja*, p. 87.
- 35 R. J. van Pelt, 'Auschwitz', in G. Morsch, B. Perz & A. Ley (eds), *Neue Studien zu nationalsozialistischen Massentötungen durch Giftgas: Historische Bedeutung, technische Entwicklung, revisionistische Leugnung* (Berlin: Metropol Verlag, 2011).

- 36 N. Lengel-Krizman, 'Genocide carried out on the Roma: Jasenovac 1942', in Jasenovac Memorial Area Public Institution (ed.), *Jasenovac Memorial Site: Catalogue* (Jasenovac: Biblioteka Kameni Cvijet, 2006), p. 162.
- 37 See Goldstein & Goldstein, *Holokaust u Zagrebu*, p. 317.
- 38 See Dulić, *Utopias of Nation*, p. 277.
- 39 USHMM, Photograph #46689.
- 40 See report by the Croatian gendarmerie post at Široka Kula, 3 September 1941, s. Zapovjedništvo OK Gospić to Grupa Generala Lukica kod 2. Talianske Armate, 3 September 1941, AVII, NDH/67, 3/20-1.
- 41 VOZ Mostar to the military office of Poglavnik, 18 September 1942, AVII, NDH/229, MHD br. 4628/Taj; and report of the Croatian gendarmerie post at Široka Kula, 3 September 1941, AVII, NDH/67, 3/20-1; and S. Trifković, 'The Ustaša movement and European politics, 1929–1945', unpublished dissertation, University of Southampton (1990), p. 223. In some cases, petrol was poured on the corpses by the Italian army and they were incinerated; see 1st HOP to RAVSIGUR, 21 September 1941, AVII, NDH/152, 5/43.
- 42 Wing command of gendarmerie Bileća to 4th HOP, 27 November 1941, AVII, NDH/143a, 7/29-1; gendarmerie post Ravno to 4th HOP, 22 September 1941, AVII, NDH/143c, 3/30-1.
- 43 A large number of reports exist, differing in their detail but consistent in the general tenor. See Commander 4th HOP Sarajevo to Ravsigur, 8 October 1941, AVII, NDH/143a, 4/19-1, and Oruz. Krilno Zap. u Bileci to Zap. 4th HOP, 27 November 1941, AVII, NDH/143a, 7/29-1, and camp report 16–31 August 1942, VOZ to PVU, 10 September 1942; Croatian State Archives, HR HDA 223/30, no. 1180, and gendarmerie post Ravno, 22 September 1941. See also Report by the Ministry of Interior, 7 November 1941. Trifković, 'The Ustaša movement', p. 223.
- 44 Report by the Ministry of Interior, 7 November 1941, Croatian State Archives, HR HDA 223/30, no. 1180.
- 45 For the speech on a 'sensible solution to the Serbian problem', see Tomasevich, *War and Revolution*, p. 440.
- 46 Glaise to the OKW, 10 July 1941, BA-MA, 20-12/454, Fs no. 187/41.
- 47 See Kasche to AA, 30 April 1941, US National Archives and Records Administration (henceforth NARA) T-120/5787, H301722; Goldstein & Goldstein, *Holokaust u Zagrebu*, p. 94; Tomasevich, *War and Revolution*, p. 398.
- 48 Report by the 3rd Croatian gendarmerie regiment, 10 October 1942, AVII, NDH/162, 8/14-1.
- 49 Statement by Banović, AVII, NDH, 44/7-2, 162; Wing commander of gendarmerie Banja Luka to senior state and military posts (circular), 12 November 1942, AVII, NDH/162, 9/27. On the justification of the massacre on the part of the Ustaša as a military exercise, see the report by the 8th Ustaša battalion, AVII, NDH, 4-63, 76.
- 50 See VOZ to circulation, 23 October 1942, AVII, NDH/75, 4/2-1.
- 51 See S. Kalyvas, *The Logic of Violence in Civil War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

- 52 DGA, Report (appendix 2), 26 October 1942, BA-MA, RH 31 III/7, without running no.
- 53 Arthur Häffner to DGiA, 27 August 1941, BA-MA, RH 31 III/13, p. 49.
- 54 4th HOP to VOZ, 4 March 1942, AVII, NDH/75, 3/17-1.
- 55 The torments mentioned here are based on a DGA record (passed on to the Military Commander, Serbia, 24 June 1941), quoted in Vukčević, *Zločini Nezavisne Države Hrvatske*, p. 137, doc. 76. See also the Wehrmacht, 718. ID, Ia to Kdr.Gen.u.Bef.i.S., passed on to OKW, 9 June 1942, NARA, T-501/250, fr. 1072 et seq.; as well as the report of the Croatian commander of the military border to the military office of Poglavnik of 4 September 1941, Historical Museum of Bosnia and Hercegovina (HM BiH), NDH/1941, no. 92. In the reports of the survivors of the Ustaša massacres inside and outside the camps there are numerous descriptions of boundless and sadistic acts of violence. See for instance E. Berger, *44 mjeseca u Jasenovcu* (Zagreb: Grafički zavod Hrvatske, 1966); M. Kolar-Dimitrijević, 'Sjećanja veterinar Zorka Goluba na trinaest dana boravka u logoru Jasenovac 1942. Godine', *Časopis za Suvremenu Povijest*, 15:2 (1983), pp. 155–76, 175; A. Ciliga, *Sam kroz Europu u ratu, 1939–1945* (Rome: Na Pragu sutrašnjice, 1978), p. 236; Savez Jevrejskih Opština, *Zločini fašističkih okupatora i njihovih pomagača protiv Jevreja u Jugoslaviji* (Belgrade: Association of Jewish Communities in Yugoslavia, 1952), p. 93. See also Broucek, *Deutscher Bevollmächtigter General*, p. 165; V. Kazimirović, *NDH u svjetlu nemačkih dokumenata i dnevnika Gleza fon Horstenau, 1941–1944* (Belgrade: Nova knj. Nar. knj., 1987), p. 111. On the use of both blunt and sharp weapons when killing see Arthur Häffner to D.G.i.A., 3 August 1941, BA-MA, RH 31 III/13, Bl. 42; and ZHO to all central posts of the state, the Ustaša and the army, 18 February 1942, AVII, NDH/75, 2/16-1, report no. 431 taj; interview with Miloš Despot from Bijeljina, USHMM RG-50.468/10, Tape 1.
- 56 See E. von Erdmann, 'Vergewaltigung als Kommunikation zwischen Männern: Kontexte und Auseinandersetzung in Publizistik und Literatur', in M. Erstić, S. Kabić & B. Künkel (eds), *Opfer, Beute, Boten der Humanisierung? Zur künstlerischen Rezeption der Überlebensstrategien von Frauen im Bosnienkrieg und im Zweiten Weltkrieg* (Bielefeld: Transcript Verlag, 2012).
- 57 See Kom.Gen.u.Bef.i.Serbien, Ia, to OKW, 9 June 1942, NARA, T-501/250, fr. 1072, and 718. ID, Ia to Kom.Gen.u.Bef.i.Serbien, 9 June 1942, NARA T-501/250, fr. 1074; in addition, Chief Sipo/SD Belgrad sent a report to the police attaché in Zagreb, Helm – see NARA, T-120/5786, H300761 et seq.
- 58 Korb, *Im Schatten des Weltkriegs*, pp. 305f.
- 59 R. B. Birn, 'Austrian higher SS and police leaders and their participation in the Holocaust in the Balkans', *Holocaust and Genocide Studies*, 6:4 (1991), pp. 351–72, at p. 359.
- 60 V. Dedijer, *Jasenovac – das jugoslawische Auschwitz und der Vatikan* (Freiburg: Ahriman Verlag, 1989).

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